



Joanna  
-latest  
in a long,  
tough line of  
**Avenger**  
**girls**  
by Valerie Clarke

JOHN PAUL

The new-look avenging angel in the life of John Steed takes her bow in three weeks' time. And as a prelude to the series we look back at the girls who went before — and forward to Joanna, wearing “stockings, suspenders and showing lots of thigh”

**T**HE ladies—Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale (from 1962 to 1964), Diana Rigg as Emma Peel (1965 to 1967) and Linda Thorson as Tara King (1968 and 1969)—came and went. The gentleman—Patrick Macnee as John Steed (from 1961 to 1969) stayed, and stays (albeit as Uncle Steed to Gareth Hunt's Mike Gambit and Joanna Lumley's Purdey) in the forthcoming £4 million production of *The New Avengers*.

Competition has hotted up since Linda Thorson's day, for Joanna Lumley pipped 300 other actresses at the post for the coveted part. “Probably,” she says, “because they could see on my little face just how much I wanted the role.”

Brian Clemens, writer, producer and originator of the series, sees Purdey as “strictly a stockings and suspenders girl, giving glimpses of lots of thigh.” Joanna Lumley and her clothes designer Catherine Buckley weren't happy about this before/continued overleaf

Honor Blackman was Cathy Gale: what she lacked in brawn she made up for in judo, black boots, leather combat suits—and brains in *The Avengers*.

Diana Rigg was Emma Peel: she became the highest-paid actress on TV—and went on to enjoy a James Bond bonanza.



Linda Thorson was Tara King: *The Avengers* was responsible for launching her into the theatre—and now into films.

# 'Steed always won through in the end'

continued from page 23 | filming started at Pinewood, but Joanna now seems quite cheery about being, as she puts it, "a male chauvinist pig's dream".

Honor Blackman doesn't claim to be the world's first Women's Libber. "The first one probably lived about 900 years ago or more," she says. "But I was a first for television." Cathy Gale was anthropologist,

academic, all brain and what she didn't have in the way of brawn she made up for in motorbikes, black boots, leather combat suits and judo. She put Steed down but Steed always won through "quite deliciously"—Honor Blackman's words—in the end.

"We had enormous problems with re-writes at the beginning," she says. "Cathy Gale was so wet I had to say: 'Look, write my part as if I were a man and I'll turn it into a woman's part because I am a woman.' Patrick, bless him was always thinking up gags for me to get one over on him as Steed." Macnee, talking of the large female audience the series attracted, says: "A woman knocking a few men around? What woman could fail to

find that attractive in those days?"

Diana Rigg, then 26, brought to *The Avengers* all the irreverence of the mid-Sixties, and style almost for the sake of style. She says she and Macnee shared the same spoofing sense of humour: "We quietly sent up most things, including ourselves." And their witty and friendly shorthand came through on screen. They camped up everything. And the series gathered a cult following, especially on American college campuses during the repeat showings of the Diana Rigg episodes. She and Macnee were considered classic send-up artists—on a par with Orson Welles, Humphrey Bogart and Boris Karloff.

Linda Thorson, in her reign as Tara King, was selling straight sex,

and in her first episode with quite a bit of blacked face and mando-style. But her of the series had her fun with Steed.

Something wasn't The series was relegated the American audience. Nevertheless, Paris Linda Thorson (they half so keen on Diana awarded the Thorson-Macnership *Le Prix Triomphe*. However, plans for further *The Avengers*, which had in 120 countries by this scrapped. Nevertheless had made at least £17 international sales, a third came back to this country.

"For any actress to role is like winning pools," says Brian chose 30-year-old Joanna for *The New Avengers* series is already pre- wide and there's a nice two bosses of rival television stations out other beyond their budgets and then deciding who would series by tossing a example of the prodigious rewards promised *Avengers* and Joanna year contract should national passport wealth.

Honor Blackman v 30's when she was g Gale role. She'd been top for years—an ex- actress, with 17 film and had co-starred remembered TV series *Monkey* and *The Font* the same she says: "I like I hadn't eaten i then I'd always b perfect English r woman waiting at h to hand out tea, w wiches—and the p pathy."

After *The Aveng* the film role of th heroine Pussy Galor co-starring with Sea went on to play opp names: Dean Martin, Richard Widmark, Richard Attenboro Harvey.

However, two suddenly found he doldrums and took time job on a fr stall in a Chelsea She has now triumph—to the/con



"Do you make a habit of this?" Purdey (Joanna Lumley) seems about to ask new boss Steed (Patrick Macnee) amid one of the adventures in *The New Avengers*. The dynamic duo are coming shortly.

# Joanna Lumley: 'Now I can afford to get the loo repaired...'

continued from page 24/commercial theatre.

"Honor will be too modest to tell you herself," says Linda Thorson, "but she remains an enormous name. She can take a show on the road, like this new thriller play she's in called *Motive*, and pack 'em in every night. Not many actresses can do that."

Honor Blackman says she ate and wore the money she earned from *The Avengers*. She, Linda and Diana—in their first series—earned between £150 and £200 a week. But Diana, an acclaimed classical actress with five years' experience with the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford behind her, issued an ultimatum in 1966. Her demand: "Three times as much—or else!" She got it, making her the highest paid television actress of the time.

But Diana felt the real Midas touch in 1968—she was paid £50,000 for the plum role of Mrs. James Bond in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. Her fee was twice as much as that which George Lazenby received for replacing Sean Connery.

Diana has described her part in *The Avengers* as "a load of old codswallop" and says she only auditioned "for a giggle". Before Emma Peel came along she was unknown to the television viewing public but by 1967 she was voted Television Actress of the Year in 16 countries. Not only did *The Avengers* catapult her into a position of international bargaining power, it also gave her instant world-wide fame. She could pick and choose, could even afford professionally and financially to make mistakes, to dabble in anything and everything and to join the National Theatre with a take-home pay of no more than £40 a week. Right now she's filming *A Little Night Music* in Vienna—with Elizabeth Taylor—while at the same time being the National's leading lady. You can't fly much higher than that.

But the *Avenger* girls certainly worked for their money. In her first

year, Honor Blackman didn't have a single day off; Diana Rigg grew to hate being recognised and to hate any kind of publicity. Linda Thorson, dubbed "as unapproachable as Garbo, as temperamental as Callas", says: "It was pressure, honey. Incredible pressure. You could also put it down in my case to my being a very young, insecure actress."

Linda Thorson had come straight out of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and was barely 20 when she started work on the series. "I haven't worked so hard since—or learned so much so quickly," she says. "It was, when I think back, rather like looking, years later, at the 30ft. diving board you used to leap off as a child. You never gave it a second thought then, but now you think: 'My God! How did I ever do that?'"

The role of Tara King made Linda, in turn, a big box-office attraction and that was the key to her gaining the theatrical experience she'd missed out on earlier. Linda's second milestone was appearing last summer and the summer before in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in London. And coming up: a good part in Ken Russell's film *Valentino*. But, all in all, Linda Thorson is beginning to think it's about time she started kicking down doors again, *Avenger*-style.

So, if Joanna Lumley needs any help in figuring out her professional strategy, she need only study the experience of her *Avenger* predecessors. Once an £8-a-week shop assistant and a former model, Joanna has made seven films, appeared in three stage plays and is also a noted television actress—although she has done nothing she'd call "memorable" for a long time.

A bit shell-shocked from the flurry of the last six months, her plans for her newly-found *Avengers* wealth are modest and homely. "First I'll put my eight-year-old son James through prep school in Harrow and secondly I'll take away the dish from the leaking pipe in my loo and call in a plumber. I'll also be able to get the sash cords repaired. Up until now I've had to wedge cans of hair spray under the windows to keep them open."

**NEXT WEEK**

Family — or fame? Patrick Macnee faced an agonising decision early in his career. Read part one of his fascinating, revealing story.

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